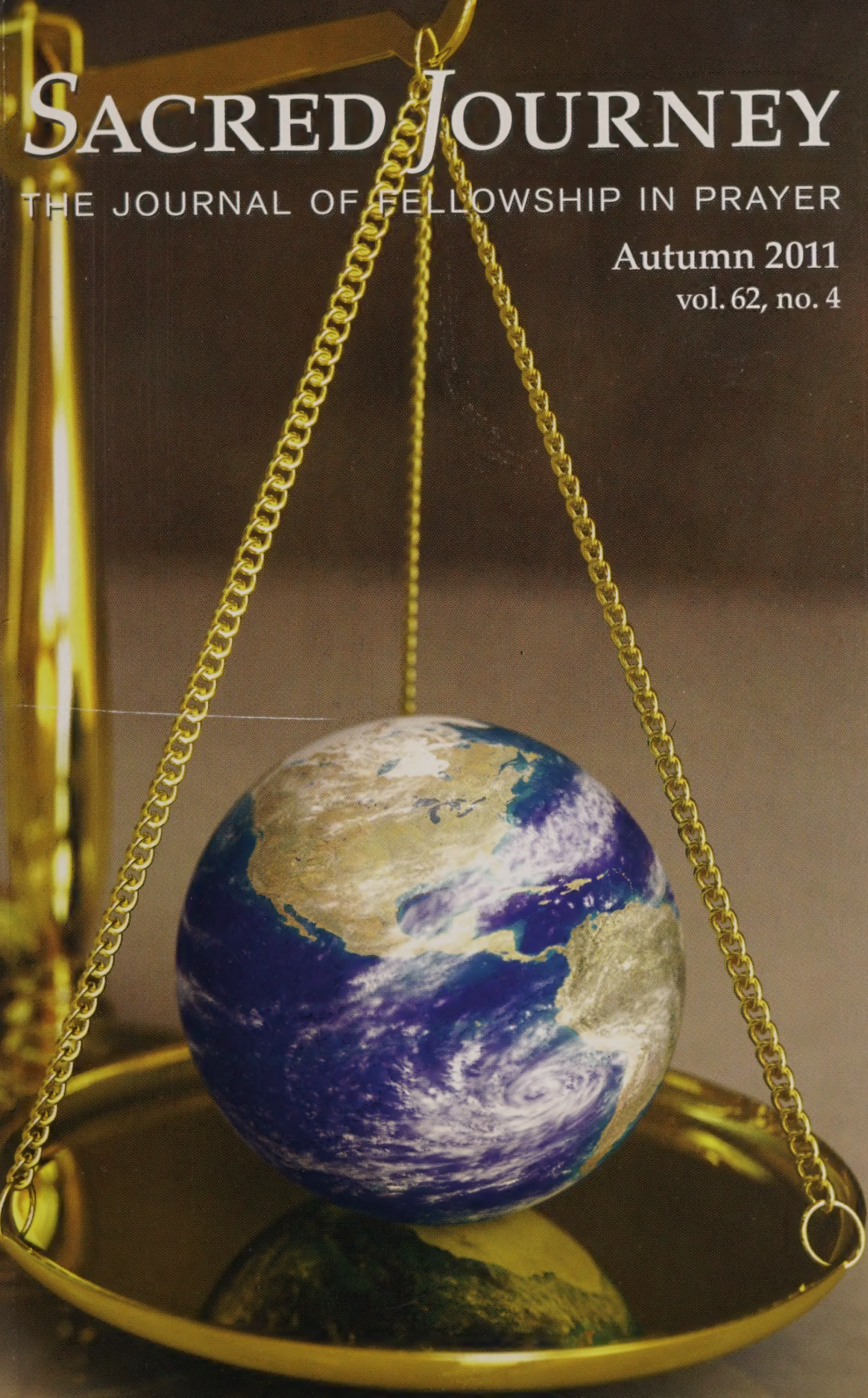



SACRED JOURNEY

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

Autumn 2011

vol. 62, no. 4





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SACRED JOURNEY

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

Fellowship In Prayer

encourages and supports
a spiritual orientation to life,

promotes the practice
of prayer, meditation,
and service to others,

and helps bring about
a deeper spirit of unity
among humankind.



SACRED JOURNEY

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Autumn 2011, vol. 62, no. 4

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Submissions

We welcome submissions of articles on prayer, meditation, spiritual experience and practice, religious faith or similar topics, as well as prayers and poetry. We look for writing that expresses an individual's personal experience while also conveying a deeper message of universal appeal. Writing must be accessible to people of all traditions. Please include a brief biography and full contact information: name, address, phone numbers and email. Articles should not exceed 1500 words and should be submitted to the editor by email: submissions@sacredjourney.org. If necessary, they may be mailed.

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The Tree of Life & the Tree of Death

DAVID NEWTON



Up until this year, my 55th year, I have escaped the loss of immediate family (excluding that is the deaths of my four grandparents), 2011 laid waste to this claim, with my father passing away in January and my mother in July. In addition an elderly gentleman, whom I had originally met a number of years ago during my short career as a hospice volunteer, also passed away. I didn't formally get to say goodbye (I actually prefer the French term *Au revoir!*) to any of them, although I had seen them all within a month of their individual deaths.

To somewhat make matters worse the condominium association that manages the community where I reside, in Princeton, NJ, ordered all resident to remove trees from the private courtyards, indicating they could pose a structural threat to the masonry walls whose upkeep is the responsibility of the association. In my courtyard this applies to two trees both planted prior to my residency. For one of those trees I am willing to comply with the request, removing the other presents me with a real problem.

The tree in question is a cherry tree, which once a year produces a pink blossom that is admired by all who venture within its vicinity. I wrote to the condominium association almost begging them to spare the tree. They kindly gave me a reprieve for a month because I had informed them that my mother was dying. At the end of the month extension I received another letter telling me that my time, or should I say the tree's time, was up. If I didn't immediately make plans to remove the tree I would be subject to a fine of \$50 a day. Nevertheless at the end of the letter they also said that if I so wished I had the right to refer the matter to the association's Ombudsman, who would make a final recommendation to the board. I have opted to appeal to the Ombudsman, following which I will either be directed to immediately remove the tree or win a permanent reprieve


for the tree or win a temporary reprieve allowing her one last flowering season prior to her removal.

There is a link, admittedly tenuous, between the passing of my parents, the elderly man, whom I periodically used to visit, and my flowering cherry tree. All three of them loved their gardens; gardening for them went beyond the physical realm and embraced the spiritual. For my part I am a horrible gardener, inheriting virtually none of my mother's "green thumb," yet I feel the need to defend the Cherry Tree's existence and delay the inevitable for as long as possible.

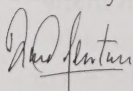
I cannot even claim the moral high ground over the condominium association; I am merely trying to prolong the life of a tree thereby preventing further loss. In my own, probably self-righteous and sanctimonious way, the protest is my attempt to give life to the words of the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, written as his own father lay dying:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rage at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light....
And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

I can only hope that something positive comes from all this, perhaps a way of commemorating their lives will emerge. Gardening, after all, demonstrates the gardener's faith in the future!

Please enjoy this edition of *SACRED JOURNEY*; life is indeed a Sacred Journey. 

Sincerely,



David Newton

Holy Cow!

JANET M. HAAG



As I let my thoughts drift around themes of respect for the earth, food justice, fasting and feasting—I had a flashback of sitting around a farm table with a student and her family some years ago. Her grandmother was bustling about serving the meal while the rest of us engaged in animated conversation. “Fresh milk, honey?”

she interjected. “Yes, thank you,” I replied. However, I had completely missed the operative word in her offer—fresh! I subsequently picked up the glass she placed in front of me which felt surprisingly warm to the touch and then I smelled it—COW! “I can’t drink this milk,” I thought. My face must have revealed my consternation because with a hearty chuckle “grandma” whisked the glass away noting, “It’s OK, Honey, I can see you are used to the homogenized, pasteurized variety!” We all laughed!

This incident, however, gives me pause to consider how disconnected we have become from the sources of our food. For the most part, we take them for granted. We manipulate them to suit our preferences. We eat and drink, and sometimes, we give thanks, but I wonder how often we are really conscious of the way these activities connect us within the web of life. They bring us into an incredible interdependent cycle of dying and rising, giving and receiving—acts of transformation, constantly creating something new. We are not outside this process; we are in it.

Perhaps, this is why food figures so prominently in many of our religious practices. Admittedly, attention is frequently directed toward the Transcendent, but reverence for the Earth could and should be just as readily emphasized; the spiritual

and the physical are not mutually exclusive. Sharing a meal is communion, oneness with the Source of Life, oneness with everyone at the table, and oneness with all creation—the fruits and vegetables, the soil, the sun and rain, and yes, the cow!

As you sit down at table to enjoy your next meal, we challenge you to think about where your food originated. And as you read this issue of *SACRED JOURNEY*, we hope your spirit will be nourished, giving rise to a new level of consciousness. Bon Appétit! **SJ**

An Interview with Mary Evelyn Tucker

© David Kennard



Mary Evelyn Tucker is a Senior Lecturer and Scholar at Yale University where she holds appointments in the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies as well as the Divinity School and the Department of Religious Studies. She is a co-founder and co-director of the Forum on Religion and Ecology and organized a conference series on World Religions and Ecology at Harvard Divinity

School. Mary Evelyn is a member of the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), served on the International Earth Charter Drafting Committee and is a member of the Earth Charter International Council. She also serves on the Advisory Boards of Orion Magazine, the Garrison Institute, and Climate Central. She is the author of numerous books. Her latest endeavor is Journey of the Universe which includes a documentary film, an educational DVD series and a book. An excerpt from the book follows this interview.

Fellowship In Prayer: With evolutionary philosopher, Brian Swimme, you recently released a new book and documentary film—*Journey of the Universe*, what is its central message?

Mary Evelyn Tucker: The film's central message is that we have been birthed out of an immense journey of evolutionary unfolding. The emergence of galaxies, stars and planets is part of the long lineage of life of which we are a part. The great ancestry of humans now has to be embraced as we find

our way forward on a planet struggling to sustain life itself. This universe story will give us a context for the great work of healing our planet. Humanity is currently at a crossroads integrating science and cosmology and we need to take all the knowledge and information we have learned from science and ground it in a renewed relationship to the earth, a relationship that is inherently spiritual. Only then will we find real solutions to the current issues of our time. *Journey of the Universe* is the first time the story of cosmic, Earth and human evolution has been told in a film. The *Cosmos* film series made by Carl Sagan several decades ago gave the viewer a feeling for the universe and its vastness. However, it did not concentrate on the evolution of Earth and humans. *Journey of the Universe* weaves these together with a sense of our place amidst this evolutionary narrative that includes universe, Earth and humans. Similarly, the 2007 BBC series *Planet Earth* captures the profound feeling of the beauty and complexity of the Earth and its ecosystems and life forms. However, it does not include the universe or humans, but it is an awe-inspiring series that, like *Journey of the Universe*, awakens us to a new sense of wonder. Yet another film called *Powers of Ten*, a 1968 short form American documentary, directed by Ray and Charles Eames gives us a sense of the relationship of humans to both the atomic small scale level as well as the galactic level. In our documentary, Brian and I are trying to communicate how we as humans are the microcosm, related to the macrocosm of the universe and Earth. In essence we are trying to bring to life the sense that we are part of an immense journey, that we dwell amidst extraordinary beauty, and that we are related to each part and to the whole. We are kin to all life.

You make reference to the “universe story”— calling it a “new story”—what exactly does this mean?

Stories are ways that we orient ourselves to one another—to the natural world and to the cosmos itself. Stories give us a

sense of where we've come from, why we are here and where we are going. This is why religious stories, and cosmologies in particular, have really helped to ground humans in this immense universe overcome alienation; overcome our sense of isolation and gives us tremendous sensibility of the aliveness of the world around us—how precious, how sacred, how to be cherished is the aliveness; in birds, in fish, in the animal world, in the plant world. This attunement to nature is immensely present in different world religions starting of course with the Indigenous traditions that held this in very fundamental ways. We see it in the way they pray, in their dress, in the totem animals that protect them, in hunting rituals, in the right way of taking fish—like the salmon—considered sacred in the Pacific Northwest. We have many examples of the reverence and care Indigenous peoples have toward the earth, values that are also fundamental to the teachings of many other world religions.

In 1978, the cultural historian, Thomas Berry, wrote an essay titled *The New Story*. There he called for a story that brought together the scientific knowledge of evolution along with a depth of meaning. This was later published in *The Dream of the Earth*. He felt by having a story we would be able to orient ourselves in deep time and thus contribute to the flourishing of human-Earth relations. To halt our destruction of Earth's processes we need a story that awakens us to the beauty and complexity of life itself.

Throughout the film you use words like “creative” and “transformative”—language not ordinarily associated with science—how does this, in and of itself, help to shift our perspective?

Science is indeed aware of the creative processes of nature and mathematicians and physicists often refer to the

"elegance" of a formula or solution. It is true, though, that language matters in how we relate to the dynamic processes of nature. Because these processes are dynamic and changing and because ecologists are appreciating this even more, we can refer to the transformative aspects of ecosystems, for example. What *Journey of the Universe* is illustrating is that we are birthed out of and participate in the transforming and nourishing processes of nature. Thus, what we regard as sacred is not outside of nature but rather within it. Indeed, nature's dynamic processes are sacramental and all the elements, earth, air, fire, and water are part of this great holiness.

Many indigenous peoples have had, what we would call, traditional environmental knowledge about hunting or farming or planting or practices of the seasons. Theirs is an orientation to the cosmos—to the sun, to the stars, that is creative and transformative, bringing in that universal power of the cosmos—the immediate power of nature itself. They show us that seasonal orientation, directions, colors, the sense of living within the rhythms of nature is absolutely crucial. This broad scale understanding is found not only in African indigenous traditions or Native American traditions, such as the Hopi in the Southwest, but even in East Asia in Taoism. Taoists draw on traditional environmental knowledge in their practice of medicine and healing called *Chi Gong* or *Tai Chi*, relating the human to the natural world through the movements of animals and insects. Chi energy recognizes the whole world is matter and spirit, and this is not a divided thing. When we cultivate the Chi in ourselves, which is what Chi Gong and Tai Chi does, we feel energy pouring through us. By trying to rely only on our own energy, we have lost a profound sense of connectedness to nature's energy pouring through us, in terms of food, water, air, beauty, spectacular sunrises and sunsets. Nature's energy is the fundamental energy and we need to draw

on it right now in our search for sustainable energies. It is spiritual as well as physical.

You suggest the ecological crisis we are facing is a spiritual and moral issue—would you elaborate on this?

World religions have a huge role to play in the current ecological crisis. They're beginning to find their role and their voice—it's a very exciting time in that respect. Humans have embedded themselves in various world religions and their religious views of nature have oriented them to creating culture and civilization. This means environmental crises are spiritual and moral issues. Life itself is at stake. Biological and cultural diversity has been diminished around the globe and as religions begin to realize this, they have an ethical obligation to speak out about the endangerment of life in all its multiple forms, even as they also address the impact of pollution, climate change and so on.

There is little doubt that our destruction of nature is, in part, a reflection of the fact that we have lost our reverence for nature. We see it as simply dead matter to be used as resources, to be mined and exploited, rather than as living matter, the source of ever renewing life. When we move from viewing nature as commodity to nature as community, we will make the turn toward a sustainable future. All of the world's religions have views of nature that support this sensibility. This is why we convened ten conferences at Harvard and published ten volumes on World Religions and Ecology. Today, The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale carries this work forward and is the largest international multi-religious project of its kind. With its conferences, publications, and website it is engaged in exploring religious worldviews, texts and ethics in order to broaden understanding of the complex nature of current environmental concerns. The Forum recognizes that religions need to be in dialogue with other disciplines; such as science, ethics, economics, education, public policy and gender

in seeking comprehensive solutions to both global and local environmental problems.

How do you think spiritual practice within our various faith traditions can help us as human beings better understand and embrace our relationship to the cosmos?

There are a variety of things that the world's religions are doing to reweave humans into the cosmos and Earth. Certainly a deeper understanding of seasonal rituals is one contribution. Autumn celebrations such as Thanksgiving and Sukkot honor the harvest and help people to appreciate the abundance of life. Food is celebrated in every religious tradition—Shabbat in Judaism, the Eucharist in Christianity, and Ramadan evening meals in Islam are some examples.

How do you link reverence for the earth to issues of social justice?

Both peace and justice depend in countless ways on a healthy Earth community. Already drought conditions in Africa and other parts of the world have led to war and injustice, especially in the Sudan and Darfur. As global warming increases it is clear that the poor will be most adversely affected. Thus issues of climate justice are emerging around the world.

Additionally, toxicity and pollution have often had the most impact on communities of color who do not have resources to defend themselves. This is the case in "Cancer Alley" in Louisiana where the petrochemical industry has placed numerous treatment plants. Eco-justice is thus emerging as a critical alliance of social and environmental justice concerns.

Ultimately, what creative impact do you hope *Journey of the Universe* will have?

This project is a film, book and educational series of twenty interviews. As a whole project, we hope the film will be a gateway to an awakening to awe and wonder regarding the unfolding universe while the book will deepen that understanding and heighten our awareness of the need for a comprehensive response to the challenges of our moment. We hope the twenty part interview series will expand our knowledge of the universe story and feature different aspects of the healing work already taking place. This includes areas such as ecological economic, eco-cities, sustainable agriculture and energy. We are trying to avoid presenting the gloom and doom perspective of the news about social and environmental destruction in our time. People are already shut down with the despair and disempowerment they feel regarding the immense challenges we are facing, especially regarding ecological diminishment and the loss of community ties. In *Journey of the Universe* we are aiming to ignite and inspire energy for transformations ahead. We lose so much if we lose hope. We wish to awaken awe and wonder in relation to the universe and Earth. If we can evoke a deep responsiveness to life and its complex processes that have birthed us, then we have the possibility of evoking responsibility for its continuity. There is an urgency about our moment, filled as it is with both peril and promise, and future generations are looking to us. We can indeed help renew the face of the Earth!

This topic is very fascinating. Thank you for all your dedication in bringing this to our attention in such an informative and beautiful way.

My pleasure.

The Emanating Brilliance of Stars

BRIAN THOMAS SWIMME AND MARY EVELYN TUCKER

Why are we so fascinated by the stars? Some of our ancestors thought stars were gods. Still others thought the stars were angels pouring forth virtue upon the Earth. Contemporary scientists refer to stars as giant balls of gas.

The need to orient ourselves with respect to the stars continues, but the way that twenty-first century humans approach this challenge includes a growing base of knowledge about the stars that previous generations did not enjoy. Perhaps the most significant discovery is that stars are self-organizing processes. They are not just unchanging bright objects in the night sky. Stars proceed through stages of development that enable their radiance to come forth.

What is the ultimate origin of a star's radiance? It comes from the intense compression of matter under the force of gravity. Strictly speaking, gravity is an effect of mass. Consider a vast cloud of hydrogen and helium that is destined to collapse into a future star. The gravitational attraction that causes the cloud to implode is generated by the mass of the cloud itself. In other words, the mass of the future star creates the gravity necessary to give birth to the star itself. In that sense, each star is a self-generating event.

And stars not only shine. They resonate, they communicate. Humans throughout history on every continent and in every culture have been stunned by the presence of stars in the vastness of the night sky. They have meditated on the beauty of the Big Dipper. So deeply moved by the majesty of the constellations and by the ineffable majesty emanating from the brilliance of stars, many have built their lives around them. They have imagined ways of not only organizing their personal lives but even patterning civilizations around the beauty and order found there.

In many cultures throughout history humans intuited that they descended from the stars, even before they had the empirical evidence from science that our bodies were formed by the elements forged by the stars. Humans felt something in the depths of the night as they contemplated the presence of the stars. They began to suspect that the meaning of their lives went far beyond what preoccupied them during the urgencies of the daytime world. They knew in their hearts that their journey and the radiance of the stars were interwoven.

The essence of the universe story is this: the stars are our ancestors. Out of them, everything comes forth. The stars are dynamic entities. They have a birth. They go through a development. They come to an end, sometimes a dramatic end. Here's their story.

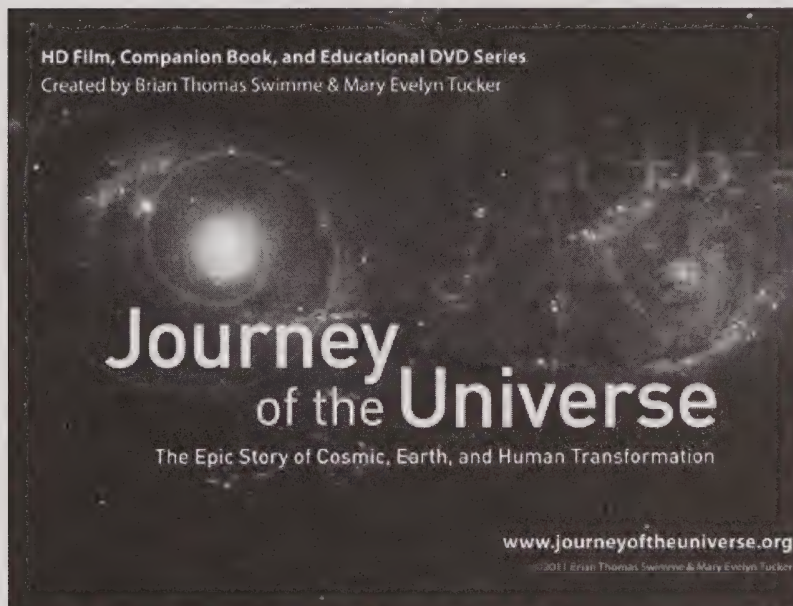
The birth of a star begins with a cloud of hydrogen and helium imploding under the influence of gravity. The cloud shrinks moment by moment. As the atoms draw themselves together into ever-tighter spaces, they collide and vibrate with energy. After each collision they gradually heat up. Even a cloud that starts out at temperatures hundreds of degrees below zero will slowly become warmer as the eons pass.

During this increase in temperature the process of star birth recapitulates processes that were active at the time of the origin of universe. As the clouds of hydrogen and helium heat up to several thousand degrees, the atoms begin to melt down. The hydrogen atoms dissolve back into being protons and electrons, which then move about in the core of the protostar as freely interacting elementary particles.

The culminating moment, the very birth of the star, takes place when the temperature reaches ten million degrees. When the elementary particles get this hot they fuse into new stable relationships. This is similar to what took place in the early moments of the universe when the first nuclei were formed. The star thus has the capacity to activate creative processes that were at work billions of years ago. Such originating creativity is

woven through space and time, waiting to be ignited. Humans in every culture have myriad ways in which this primal creativity could be accessed for the collective human journey.

Excerpted from *Journey of the Universe* © 2011 by Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker and used with permission.



To host or locate a screening of the documentary,
learn more about the Educational DVD series,
or purchase the book, please visit
www.journeyoftheuniverse.org.

WHAT I KNOW OF THE DIVINE SCIENCES AND
HOLY SCRIPTURE, I LEARNED IN WOODS AND FIELDS.

I HAVE HAD NO OTHER MASTERS THAN
THE BEECHES AND THE OAKS.

ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

The soul can split the sky in two
and let the face of God shine through.

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

When you've finished getting yourself ready
in the morning, then it is time to get your planet ready,
just so, with the greatest care.

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPERY

Every time you admire something in nature,
it's a prayer to the Creator.

VERNON HARPER

CONSTANTLY REGARD THE UNIVERSE AS ONE LIVING
CREATURE, EMBRACING ONE BEING AND ONE SOUL . . .
HOW IT ENCOMPASSES ALL THINGS WITH A SINGLE PURPOSE,
AND HOW ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER TO CAUSE ALL THAT
COMES TO PASS, AND THEIR WONDERFUL WEB AND TEXTURE.

MARCUS AURELIUS

WE SHARE THE EARTH
NOT ONLY WITH OUR FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS,
BUT WITH ALL THE OTHER CREATURES AND PLANTS.
THE DALAI LAMA

Look out into the universe and contemplate the
glory of God. Observe the stars, millions of them,
twinkling in the night sky, all with a message of
unity, part of the very nature of God.

SAI BABA

WE HAVE A NEW STORY OF THE UNIVERSE.
SCIENCE HAS GIVEN US A NEW REVELATORY EXPERIENCE.
IT IS NOW GIVING US A NEW INTIMACY WITH THE EARTH.

THOMAS BERRY

Were there no God, we would be in this glorious world
with grateful hearts and no one to thank.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

May you be drenched
with the longing for peace
and make justice blossom on Earth.

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

WE ARE LIVING ON THIS PLANET
AS IF WE HAD ANOTHER ONE TO GO TO.

TERRI SWEARINGEN

FORGET NOT THAT THE EARTH DELIGHTS
TO FEEL YOUR BARE FEET
AND THE WINDS LONG TO PLAY WITH YOUR HAIR.

KAHIL GIBRAN

Vegetable Vernacular

DIANA BOEKE

A little over a year ago, way back when my farm dream was confined to the small 4 x 10 patch of weeds between the driveway and the entrance to our apartment, I called my Aunt Joy in Georgia to ask her which kind of bean my uncle used to grow in the garden that cooked up so good, string beans or runner beans? Being a genteel Southern lady, she paused, to collect her thoughts and answer without directly calling attention to the error inherent in my question; “Well, I guess you would want pole beans, but he also grew bush beans. Both are good.”

So I bought some pole beans and hoped for the best in my little patch of weeds amended with garden soil. Hope apparently wasn’t enough, nor was hope with water. I harvested exactly two beans from the one scraggly little five-leafed plant drooping on the ground that emerged from the nine seeds I’d planted beneath three perfect bamboo tips, ready to support my expected abundant crop. From the elaborate trellis my husband constructed to maximize airflow and keep mildew at bay, we plucked six cucumbers and two zucchini. There were also six tomatoes from our three heirloom plants—one of which towered nearly nine feet tall—before grudgingly producing two small fruits. We also realized a fine hot pepper crop along with plenty of arugula and parsley.

We were very inspired. “Let’s become farmers and grow vegetables for a living!” we exclaimed. My husband was feeling emboldened by my previous gardening success, once producing enough vegetables to make a gourmet salad for three people at the same time! Our single-minded focus drowned out the chorus of polite naysayers and eyebrow raisers. Farming was our calling. The idea of Glean Acres was born, with a mission

of growing food, faith, and the good life. Besides, we reasoned, I was practically an expert, having worked the farm stand at the Greenbranch Organic Farm. I could identify at least seven varieties of heirloom tomatoes and at least that many of squash and peppers. Plus, I watched the comings and goings of tractors, transplants, crates of vegetables, compost, farmhands, and actual farmers from my little doorway to the barn and the fields. I was also quite good at watering raised beds of herbs and picking off those smelly little parsley worms—never mind that they turn into gorgeous swallowtail butterflies! Go eat some wild carrot or something!

So once we tucked our chicken safely away in their handmade coops out on the pasture, we set about growing vegetables for market, with enough additional to feed ourselves. The existing raised beds proved mighty handy for getting our first plants out before mid-summer. All we had to do was fill them with proper dirt—8 tons of it—and nestle our transplants in. That done, we moved on to tilling up some new beds in what used to be a paddock. We became followers of the WORD contained in the *Vegetable Gardener's Bible*, which advocates Wide rows, Organic methods, Raised beds, and Deep soil. You would think we are on a first-name basis with the author, Edward Smith. When my husband, Amir, and I discuss options for things like the eradication of squash bugs Amir will say, "Well, Ed says to pick them off by hand."

Looking around after we shaped our first couple of beds, I decided this was exactly the way my grandpa and uncle gardened; with the exception of the occasional spraying of a chemical or two. With lots and lots of leaf mulch on the beds and pine needles in the walkways, our radical farming method seemed very homey and familiar. However, as our shiny new tiller unearthed more and more rocks, we gradually realized we were tilling in our drainfield. Oops! A redirection meant we had to keep tilling until mid July when the drought-hardened clay soil seemed merely amused by the spinning tines of the tiller.

We planted hundreds of struggling little transplants, still in their pots, one by one, just inches from their neighbors. Spacing recommendations are merely suggestions, right? These were the transplants grown from seeds we had selected back in January, when the snow was still on the ground. They were seeds we had chosen for their whimsical names more than for their hardiness or potential yield. Thus, we grew *Black Prince* and *Garden Peach* tomatoes. *Texas Honey June* sweet corn and *Chires* baby corn, *Cossack Pineapple* ground cherries, *Sweet Chocolate* bell peppers, *Golden Bush Scallop* squash, *Jericho* lettuce, *Star of David* okra, *Blush* eggplant, *Black Beauty* zucchini, *Garden Oasis Mediterranean* and *Green Fingers*

We liked the idea of living off the land
and nearer to God
so we bought a small farm!

Persian cucumbers. And guess what? Much to our amazement, and despite the relentless attack of squash bugs and borers, cucumber and Mexican beetles, tomato horn worms and flea beetles, ladies and gentlemen, we have vegetables!

Now, about those pole beans my Aunt Joy hesitantly recommended in response to my query about what beans could produce that good old-fashioned hearty bean flavor . . . I have since learned a great deal about beans. For instance, string beans is the old-fashioned term for snap beans. Clever seed scientists have managed to breed the stringy part out of the common green bean and thus we have entered the new era of the snap bean. Most people call these “green beans,” though it doesn’t necessarily mean the bean is green, just that it is usually picked and eaten young, before the seeds inside have matured, meaning the pod is still tender and edible. We also have yellow green beans, called wax beans, as well as other colors like red green beans. Additionally, there are shelling beans, meaning

the choice bit is the mature seed inside which is dried and stored for later enjoyment—kidney beans and pinto beans. Some beans are even dual purpose so we can enjoy them young and “green” or wait for them to mature and then, shell them. It also turns out there are pole beans that are string beans and pole beans that are snap beans and pole beans that are shelling beans, as well as pole-type bush beans. Rather than trying to figure this all out, I picked out my bean seed based on its name alone: *Lazy Wife Greasy Pole Bean*.

Now today, yes today, we rest, marveling at nature’s grand diversity and letting the ground absorb the five inches of rain we got last night, immediately after I had given up on the dark clouds that had been gathering all day and reluctantly turned on the irrigation to the tomato bed. “Oh ye of little faith,” God bellowed, as He restoreth our soil and keeps us humbly on our newly mulched, narrow paths. SJ



After her post-graduate work Diana Boeke worked internationally as a teacher, a counselor, a journalist, an editor and public relations professional, yet always wished she could be a farmer. She now owns Glean Acres in Madison County, VA. To read more of Diana's farming adventures visit www.cluelessfarmer.wordpress.com.

A Prayer for Mother Earth

DOUGLAS RAYMOND ROSE

Lord,
Remember our earth today we pray
In a very special, spectacular way;
—Refresh the very air we breathe
The same air we breathe to pray.

We celebrate our earth and air
We celebrate our shining seas;
—Celebrating our golden sunlight
And midnight's star-studded trees.

Renew the emerald fields and forests
As they their restful Sabbath take;
Restoring them to your original state
—Before man the earth did break.

We join with earth and each other
Adding actions to each word we say—
Inspire us all to personally do our part
—To help heal Mother Earth today.
Amen.

Douglas Raymond Rose is an ordained minister in the Assemblies of God church, he is a free-lance writer for *Guideposts* and *Standard Publishing* and columnist for the *Grand Prairie Times*. He is a member of the Academy of American Poets.

Koinonia

JOHN PETRENKA

Lord remember me,

As you do the nearby landscape,
swaying, praying: arbor vitae,
when you come into your kingdom.

Birds fly by, play on the wind.

Abba — can I say that? — Lord
remember me.

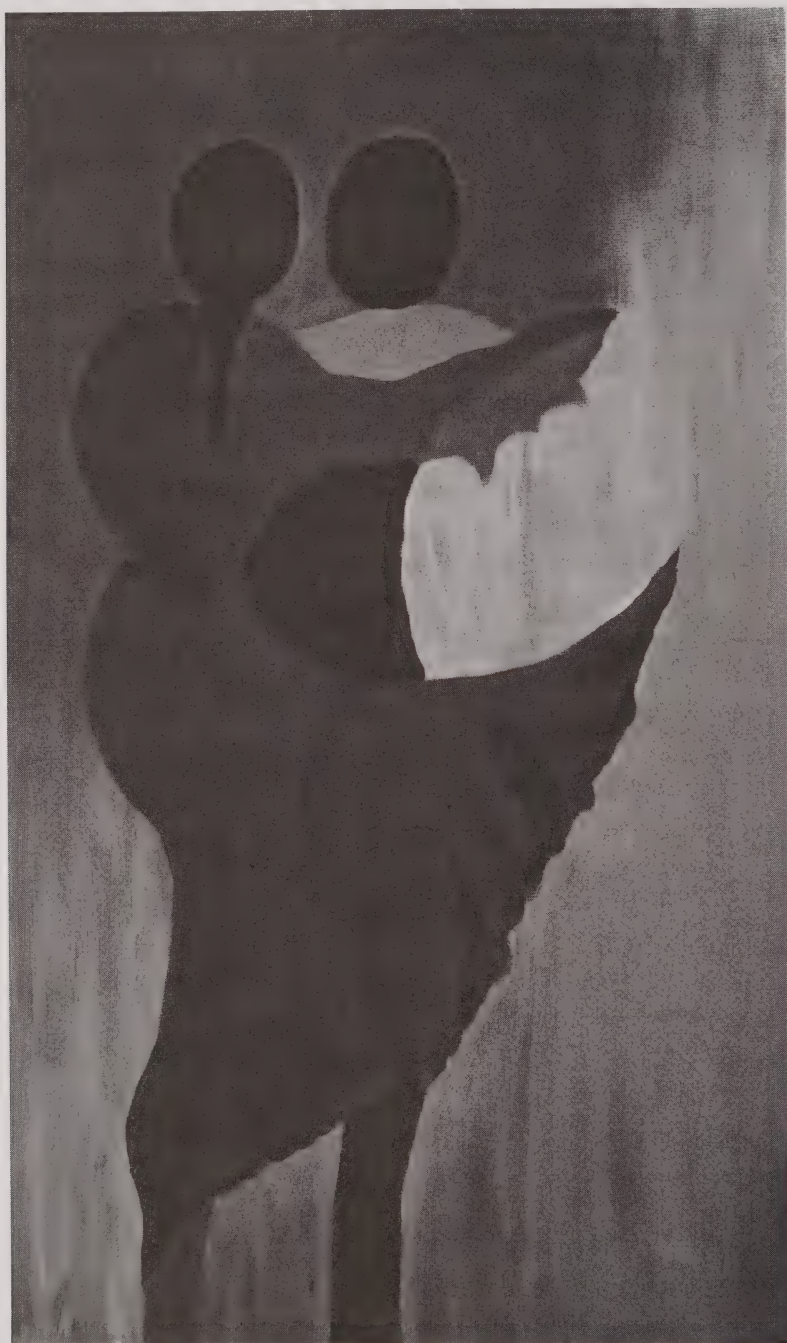
Cotton puff clouds, fill the sky, blue —
your kingdom.

Wordless prayer, bends into a liturgy,
Divine — the great present
now here — yet where?

Your kingdom come.

Holy the Immortal One, Holy the Mighty One,
Holy the Mystery.
Lord remember me.

John Petrenka has an Eastern Catholic heritage. His work experience includes parish ministry, teaching, pastoral counseling and counseling with the handicapped and disabled. Now retired, he lives in Emmaus, PA.



Afternoon Prayer

SUE COPPERNOLL

Teach me, Divine Mother,
Steps in the dance of life,
Songs only I can sing,
Words to heal, not hurt,
Comforting touch for the weary and worn;

May the light of love shine in my eyes,
May I help to lift the veil of darkness and despair,
For these are the gifts of your Spirit
Ever longing for a home in my heart
And a place in our wounded world.

Sue Coppernoll lives and writes in the southernmost range of the Ozarks, the Boston Mountains. She has retired from ministry as a pastoral counselor and retreat leader.

Ringling in the Jewish New Year, Silently

JULIE WILCHINS

If there's one thing I learned during a year as the only Jew in a small town in Spain, it's that you can perceive the divine in the unlikeliest places. Perhaps that's why, on returning to the United States, I signed up for a five-day *Vipassana* meditation retreat during the Jewish New Year (or *Rosh Hashanah*, in Hebrew). *Vipassana*, or insight meditation, starts with a focus on the breath, and ultimately, ideally, enables us to be more present and less distracted.

My *Vipassana* retreat plans surprised family and friends. In addition to being a regular holiday service-goer, I am a bundle of nerves and had never meditated before. Yet, though it sounded like a *koan*, it made sense to me: by separating myself from my usual community and rituals, maybe I could figure out how to be more mindful and a better person.

Paul, who has practiced Zen meditation for decades, warned me: "Sitting still for a long time hurts." He explained that the pain is part of the process: one tries to observe, rather than reflexively act on, urges to scratch itches and shift position. Another retreat-attending friend warned me that the other participants would "look like they're going to commit suicide. But they're actually not depressed—they're just all inside themselves." When he heard that I had never sat still for longer than a minute at a time, he advised me to practice sitting before the retreat. "You'll have a hard time with it, I'm telling you right now," he predicted.

A relative asked if we were allowed to bring BlackBerrys. I struggled to stifle the giggle induced by the thought of a bunch of people sitting cross-legged in silence, tapping

into their BlackBerrys. “I don’t think so,” I responded soberly.

The departure day broke beautiful and sunny. I loaded the car with warm clothes, borrowed meditation cushions, and books by Abraham Joshua Heschel. The non-denominational retreat center lies in a rural area of rolling hills and forest, a few hours south of Seattle. After signing in, I climbed a path of

respect the retreat center and each other. Our teacher, Heather, explained that ‘Buddha’ means ‘one who is awake’ in Pali, the precursor to Sanskrit. She reassured us that we were certain to benefit from the freedom of our usual distractions and demands, and the mere effort to be peaceful and alert. After a few minutes for questions, we entered our silence and our first sitting meditation.

Could separating myself from my usual community and rituals help me become more mindful?

mossy stepping-stones to my hilltop dorm.

Dinner was our only chance to talk before we plunged into silence. After dinner, we filed into the meditation hall. Windows framed the ancient evergreens outside; Zen calligraphy scrolls adorned the white walls.

We listened to an orientation tape that reminded us not to engage in any non-essential communication, and to

Heather provided us with direction. We kept our eyes closed, and tried to be present within our bodies: to breathe consciously, to register how our bodies felt in their current positions, to notice pain but attempt to stay still rather than shifting immediately. During the first session, I struggled mightily with the latter. I followed Paul's tips on sitting posture, but found that both feet fell painfully asleep within minutes.



Lack of distraction, quiet and the attendant aloneness scared me. Yet, despite my fears, I gradually came to understand a little of the sense and beauty of Vipassana meditation. We are all creatures of habit, hard-wired to be jumpy and to respond instinctively to new experiences based on past experiences and to flit from one micro-experience to the next. Meditation forces us to stay still in the present moment, instead of dwelling on fears about the future or anxiety about the past. When

sitting, we will our bodies not to react immediately, wherever our minds wander. Many who meditate strive to develop the capacity to respond in a similarly measured way to all situations in everyday life, just as in meditation.

Each morning a bell woke us at 5:45, for our first sitting meditation at 6:15. It was nearly pitch-dark at that hour, and I could still see a couple of stars. I loved beginning the day in silence as the darkness grew light. It was a cozy silence, interrupted only by the occasional train whistle

from the Burlington Northern Line nearby or the rustle of cloth from a fidgety retreat participant or bird song—all sounds that grew increasingly familiar with each passing hour and came to form a soothing background melody as the days wore on.

After the first morning sitting, we would go to the dining hall for breakfast and morning chores. A partner and I washed dishes after breakfast. Others had taken the chores of chopping vegetables for our veggie-heavy lunch and dinner, or cleaning the dining hall or bathrooms, or ringing the bell that punctuated our day.

Our days followed a pattern of alternating sitting meditation and walking meditation, interspersed with *dharma* talks, meals, chores, and free time. During walking meditation, we would wander on the paths throughout the property or off the property on routes suggested by the retreat center. The day wound down with a *dharma* talk, a walking meditation and a final sitting meditation ending at 9:45.

This routine of sitting, walking, eating simple vegetarian food and having

no other responsibilities beyond a designated chore made me slow way down. I would sit on a chair and look peacefully at a tree, my head close to empty, for extended periods of time. I slept very deeply. Heather told us that was normal and a product of our usual exhaustion and sensory overload.

I had been scared of the lack of communication, but came to treasure it. We were supposed to avoid even meeting the gaze of other retreat participants, in addition to maintaining silence. I had never realized how much effort we expend in studying the facial expressions and body language of others, assessing them, and modulating our expressions and words and body language to respond accordingly. It was a luxury to be barred from even looking at others, and to be secure in the knowledge that no one was looking at me either. When I sneaked peeks at others' faces, I saw

a gamut of naked emotions on display: smiles, placidity, grimaces, spaciness and tears.

A scrawled note in my sandal on the second-to-last day of the retreat interrupted the idyll. Reaching for my shoes after a sitting meditation, I discovered a bit of lined paper that read "In loving kindness should you choose to use this: Scott 503-555-1212; in loving tenderness, if not."

I had frequently run into the same man during walking meditation, in the only consistently sunny spot on the retreat center grounds. I suspected he was the note's writer. We had never spoken, so I didn't know what he thought we might have in common, save for a tendency to walk in the same area and a propensity for between-meal snacking.

I struggled to sleep that night, harboring slightly paranoid thoughts about Scott checking me out. My new grounding in meditation lessened the anxiety. Before, I might have lain awake tossing and turning, ratted Scott out

to the teacher or plotted to give him a piece of my mind. Instead I hauled out the meditation cushion, tried to focus on my breath and sat quietly until I felt calm enough to sleep.


On the final morning of the retreat, Heather talked to us about transitioning back to regular life. She advised us to take it slowly: we would start by talking to each other at breakfast. We hovered nervously around the buffet table, testing out looking into other people's eyes and chatting.

My pulse raced with the stimulation of scanning faces, modulating my own expression and listening and responding. I couldn't believe that we usually function with so many external stimuli. However, I thrilled in connecting with my twenty-eight companions after the five days we'd spent together in silence. Hearing them talk about their efforts to be present and do good in the world continued to inspire me, just as our companionable silence had during the

previous five days.

I was ready to go home, to celebrate the rest of the Jewish High Holidays and a year of new beginnings and better things. I drove slowly along the country roads on the way back to Seattle, deeply inhaling the fragrance of hay and evergreen trees. I calmly breathed in and out as I vowed to invite someone in need to dinner, load up on non-perishables for our food drive and redouble my efforts

at patience and compassion toward others and myself.

This year, I'll attend Jewish New Year services and traditional meals with my usual community. But I will also call on the lessons I learned during my silent Rosh Hashanah, and continue to sit quietly for a time each morning as I trace another filament in the gossamer connecting each of us to one another and to the divine. 

Julie Wilchins is a Spanish-English translator, writer and lawyer in Seattle, WA. Julie will take the time to pray and meditate whether she is in the city, in the mountains and forests of Puget Sound and most recently on the Camino de Santiago in Spain.

Surrounded by Love

KARLA SULLIVAN

While driving to work one autumn morning, it is difficult to find words that can adequately describe my fascination with the turning of the season. Though I have experienced many a fall of changing color, the beauty of the trees flooded with flame and gold was the preamble of a perfect artist's canvas that day. The elegant stillness of nature's magnificent expression was breathtaking.

I have always loved autumn but this morning was exceptional. Just a day earlier, my daughter had commented on the irony of a "dying season" being so precious. Somehow my appreciation of nature's blessing accentuated feelings of hope and new beginnings.

Death could be beautiful even though most people would not have the same impression. But, regardless how one may define the meaning of autumn, life continues even after the blizzards of winter, the heavy rains and winds of spring and the droughts of summer. I felt rejuvenated and ready to move forward with my day.

After arriving at work, my first phone call announced the death of a cherished teacher and very close friend for thirty-seven years. Many times I was with him in the last year as he struggled with cancer. Though treatments were debilitating during his final days, he was not in pain.

For all of his life, he had taught his students to live by their own authentic and unique talent. He helped us love ourselves as we were, where we had been and how far we had come. He celebrated our achievements and comforted us when we were lost. He encouraged confidence and hope while always directing us to new beginnings.

He had passed without pain while the trees stood in regal beauty. They would bloom again as he would continue to



live in our hearts. His spirit would be taking on new loving dimensions by returning home. Strangely, I did not feel sad but peacefully grateful for my surroundings and his generous gift of love.

If we could only live our lives like my dear friend with the sole purpose of giving to others and recognize that beauty always stretches before us even in times of grief, there would be no question of peace on earth. The trees whisper their message that he is alive and well just like they are. And as the leaves begin to fall, the trees still stand ready and waiting in anticipation for new beginnings. **SJ**



Karla Sullivan has worked in the career development field. She has published four books, with two of her children's stories having been selected as honorable mention winners in The Writers Digest International Short Story Contest. Over the years she has published numerous poems in several anthologies.

The Yamuna River: India's Dying Goddess

RICHARD CONNIFF

Early this year, at the point in northern India where the Yamuna River empties into the Ganges, several hundred people set out on a six-week protest march. They were aiming to gather strength in numbers en route to New Delhi, the national capital, halfway up the Yamuna River. The river itself was the subject of their protest, and the popular chant was "*Yamuna Bachao, Pollution Bhagao!*" meaning "Save the Yamuna, Stop the Pollution!"

They had ample cause for complaint. The Yamuna River starts out clear as rainwater from a lake and hot spring at the foot of a glacier, 19,200 feet up in the Himalayas. But for much of its 853-mile length, it is now one of the world's most defiled rivers. Agricultural demand repeatedly depletes the river's flow. Rapid modernization of the Indian economy since the 1980s has added thousands of manufacturing plants to the Yamuna's watershed, with little thought given to how much water they take out or how much pollution they add back. And urbanization has roughly quintupled the population of New Delhi, from about 3.5 million people 30 years ago to more than 18 million today.

In some places, the Yamuna is now so heavily exploited that broad swaths of riverbed lie naked and exposed to the sun for much of the year. In other places, the river is a sudsy, listless morass of human, industrial and agricultural wastes, literally an open sewer. Given that 60 million people depend on the river for bathing and drinking water, a protest might seem inevitable.

The surprising thing, at least to untutored Western eyes, was that the leaders of the Yamuna march were not primarily

political activists. They were *sadhus*, or holy men, devotees of the central Hindu hero and deity *Krishna*. They briefly shut down their temples along the river as part of the protest, and they added a colorful strand of religious belief to the familiar environmental language of oxygen content, turbidity and toxicity. When Mathura, one of the towns along the route, moved to end the blight of plastic shopping bags along the river banks, *The Times of India* headlined the news: "Lord Krishna's birthplace now polythene-free."

For Hindus, the Yamuna is not just a natural resource, but also one of the holiest rivers in India. She is a goddess, a giver of life and the chief lover of Krishna. So the protesters were motivated as much by faith as by environmental outrage. In the past they would have relied exclusively on prayers, incense and offerings of fresh flowers to practice *seva*, the Hindu ritual of loving service to the deity. But of necessity *seva* has lately also come to mean environmental action, working to restore life to a river now widely regarded as dead.

That same disorienting blend of science and religion also showed up at a January conference on the banks of the Yamuna. A collaborative effort between TERI University in New Delhi and the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale, the conference brought ecologists, microbiologists, chemists and hydrologists together with spiritual leaders and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The stated purpose was to foster understanding across disciplines and to bridge the gap between studies focused exclusively on scientific issues and the broader world of societal, ethical and religious concerns. But for the Americans who attended, the surprise was how comparatively narrow that gap is, at least on the Indian side.

"Coming from America, we were all amazed at the comfort and readiness with which these scientists were willing to engage in discussions that included religion," says one participant, David Haberman, a professor of religious studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. They were also intrigued

with the potential to bring about change for the Yamuna River through careful scientific research disseminated and acted on by millions of people with a powerful spiritual motivation. An inadvertent side effect was to leave some of the Americans wondering about missed opportunities back home. That is, would environmental remedies come easier if science and religion could look beyond their differences and begin to seek common ground?

For many scientists who have lived through 30 years of American culture wars, the words religion and ecology can seem to go together about as well as a blind date between Mother Teresa and Richard Dawkins. So does religion have anything to add to the search for environmental solutions, whether in India or the United States? "Religions have been late to this," says Tucker. "We often say religions have problems and promise. Everybody realizes there's a problematic side, the fundamentalist side, the narrow-minded side." But religions have also been a powerful force behind some of the great reform movements of the past—for instance, the drive by Quakers and other religious groups to abolish slavery, Mahatma Gandhi's long struggle to win India's freedom from British colonial rule and the campaign by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other religious leaders during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. From a purely practical view, Tucker adds, religions "are the largest NGOs in the world, and people have to understand that you can't just ignore them."

There are few places on Earth with as rich a cultural and religious story about the natural world as India. It's also a story that might seem particularly suited to getting the environmental answers right: In place of Judeo-Christian ideas about man's "dominion over nature," Hinduism and Buddhism both regard humans as more closely integrated into nature. And while some traditional religious groups in the West tremble at any hint of pantheism, Hindus see God in the world around them and freely worship trees, animals and especially rivers.

(Hinduism actually ranks a monkey, *Hanuman*, in its pantheon of deities and has no problem with Darwinian evolution being taught in schools.) So why didn't this religious tradition prevent environmental catastrophe in the first place on the Yamuna? And why should anyone expect the combination of science and religious faith to work there now?

What happened to the Yamuna "was essentially the result of isolated actions, which were not connected," says Rajendra Pachauri, who is director-general and chancellor of TERI University. The river seemed relatively healthy when he first moved to New Delhi almost 30 years ago. "People were swimming in the river. You could drink the water." But the condition of the Yamuna deteriorated rapidly from that point as India began to modernize. "There was clearly a lack of coordination, a lack of information and perhaps an ignorance of the aggregate impacts. But now there is no such excuse. Now we see the collective impact of what happened."

Environmentalists often romanticize Eastern religions as more environmentally friendly, assuming some past "eco-golden age," writes Emma Tomalin, a religious studies lecturer at The University of Leeds. But unlike the largely Western phenomenon of religious environmentalism, the "nature religion" of Hinduism is merely the worship of elements of the natural world, she argues, "most often with no basis in the ideas and values of contemporary environmentalist thinking." The idea that a river goddess "can carry away impurities—both spiritual and physical—may actually act as an impediment," encouraging people to continue treating the river as a dumping ground. In the "empty belly" politics of India's poor, questions of survival and the tantalizing promise of prosperity can also easily trump environmental or religious considerations. Thus India's first prime minister after independence, Jawaharlal Nehru, was able to deftly co-opt river worship by describing the big dam projects he espoused as "the temples of a modern India."

Among believers on the banks of the Yamuna now, the reality is that most fit into three broad categories, Haberman says:

Some think that because the river is a goddess, she can never be polluted, no matter how physically defiled. Others believe the goddess herself is dying and in need of their help. A third group believes that the pollution can harm creatures that depend on the river for survival, but not the goddess herself. In fact, the creatures that depend on the river are clearly in trouble. The big river turtles that carry the goddess Yamuna in religious imagery have now largely vanished, bird and fish species that depend on the river have also suffered. Even human health is being affected.

In Braj Mandal, the area below New Delhi that is both the holiest—and most polluted—section of the Yamuna, (on government maps, it's often referred to as "the eutrophicated segment") the river is so visibly filthy there that most temples now use bottled water for the daily bathing of statues. In some areas they have no choice: at the *Gokul Krishna Temple*, construction of a dam means there's no longer any river water in front of the temples for ritual bathing by pilgrims. At Vrindavan, another of the ancient temple cities, religious leaders have had to fight, so far successfully, against efforts to build a highway directly over the surface of the Yamuna.

Science can help provide these religious leaders with the evidence they need to save the river, says John Grim. The ambition is to build a dialogue, with students taking the time, as they monitor water quality, to explain their work to priests in the temples, and vice versa: "'What does the river mean to you? And what does it mean if you take statues into the river to wash them?' Students bring those issues to the fore: 'Can we assume the river is purifying if it's polluted?'" Science is also the best tool for clarifying the unseen ways the river affects

pilgrims who come to the river—for instance, with diseases like dengue fever, from mosquitoes breeding in stagnant water.

For David Haberman, the struggle for the soul of religion—all religions, really—has to do with whether they continue to stand by as the world collapses around them or shift course to focus on stewardship, the idea that “the world was given as a gift of God” and that we are not its owners, but its caretakers. It has to do with whether science and religion can set aside their mutual suspicion and learn to collaborate.

“How that’s going to play out remains to be seen,” he says. “But the whole world has something at stake now in that conflict.”



Richard Conniff's latest book is *The Species Seekers: Hereos, Fools and the Mad Pursuit of Life on Earth*. He is a Guggenheim Fellow and has received the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism. He is a frequent commentator on NPR's *Market Place* and is the author of seven books. His articles have appeared in *National Geographic*, *Time*, *Smithsonian* and other publications. The full article first appeared in *The Journal of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies* and this excerpt is used with permission.

The Rock of I

SAM BOYLE

Erode me, life
wash away this impurity and ignorance
So I can slowly join you
in an unknown realm

Stability persisting through fear, hatred and envy
The balance to let tide after tide crash
without a sound
Beauty reflecting in the turbulence

Individual universes
coalesce, collaborate and construct
infinite meaning
across the stars

This is the truth
that seemed further than the moon
for in hell or high water
Clarity shines through

This gift, often unseen
is given
when we look past the me
and see the us in us

And the knower is not separated from the known
as the pebble sees itself
and slowly, but dearly
helps the rest of the beach return to the sand

Sam Boyle, who grew up in Princeton, NJ, is a sophomore at Ithaca College. His spirituality began with the practice of Zen Buddhism but now incorporates all religions and thought processes. He is an avid contact juggler and performer who is studying Psychology and Neuroscience and hopes to either become a monk or a researcher.



Let Morning Come

SANDRA BOUNDS

When roosters crow
like Nature's alarm clocks
that rouse a resting Earth,

let Morning come
with virginal blush that peeps
softly through Night's dark sky.

As a genial Sun rises
to share welcome warmth
and light, let Morning come

for owls returning to roost,
for farmers ready to labor
in their forests and fields.

Let Morning come with its promise
of beauty for ashes, joy for sorrow,
and a spirit of praise for heavy hearts.

Sandra H. Bounds has an MA in English. She has taught at both the high school and community college levels. She is an active member of the Mississippi Poetry Society where she was named Poet of the Year, honoring her selection by publishing a chapbook of her poetry. Sandra has been previously published in *SACRED JOURNEY* and several other periodicals including *Ancient Path*, *Evangel*, and *The Lutheran Digest*.

The Spiritual Foundations of Food Justice: You Are How You Eat

MICHAEL PERGOLA

Physical sustenance is the most basic of human necessities. How we fulfill this need evokes deep spiritual *questions*. Our answers form the foundation for how we view ourselves, each other, and the world. You have probably heard the famous statement from Ludwig Feuerbach, “You are what you eat.” Eating is one of the most intimate acts we engage in—what we eat becomes who we are, literally, but how we eat and who we eat with also has a lot to do with the way we show up in the world, the way we relate to each other. In every culture eating is a key part of the way that culture is transmitted and every spiritual tradition throughout time and across the globe has deep teachings related to food.

One of the things becoming more obvious is that our relationship to our planet needs to change. Any time we see pictures of birds covered in oil; of a flaming oil slick in the middle of a body of water like the Gulf of Mexico; we know something has to change. Since 1980 oil consumption in the United States has increased by 50%. We use twenty-one million barrels of oil per day. That’s more than the oil consumption of Japan, Germany, Russia, China and India combined. It is astounding! Interestingly enough, a tremendous amount of that oil consumption is related to food—way more than we might think. Oil is used in the creation of fertilizers, which in the short-run helps us produce more food per acre. However, in the long-run, these chemical fertilizers produce negative by-products that deplete the soil. Oil is used to run the equipment necessary to grow the enormous number of crops we grow in our industrial system, and oil is used to harvest and transport food to consumers.



It is clear that energy and food are intimately connected, as are many other aspects of our lives. We are deeply interconnected—economically, politically, socially, culturally and spiritually.

Food is a central part of our lives. Looking at what we take in by way of food and what we give out, can help wake us up to the nature of our contemporary society. I suspect all of us are busier today than when we were younger. I suspect we eat more meals in the car than we would like to admit. I suspect that most of us don't have leisurely family dinners anymore because our whole society has shifted. Market forces have eroded our sense of connection to and responsibility for the food we eat, destroying local food cultures and separating us from the inherent knowledge of what is spiritually and physically healthy. While we might question the values underlying this shift, it's not so easy to escape from it. It takes a tremendous amount of effort.

The following simple story illustrates what I mean. Two fish are swimming along and one fish says to the other, "Geez, the water is really cold today, isn't it?" The other fish replies,

"Water? What's that?" If we are like this fish, swimming in the sea without knowing it is water, the first task before us is to bring greater awareness to the food we eat and how we eat it. As this awareness increases, we have a better understanding of the dramatic impact our food system has on every aspect of life.

In order to re-invent our food system and to create a new spiritual and cultural foundation for our relationship to what we eat, we must look deeply at both the global food system as well as at every bite we take. We need to make eating a spiritual practice, leading us into sacred space from which we will make decisions that lead us to food justice.



Rev. Michael Pergola JD, MBS, is cofounder and executive director of the One Spirit Learning Alliance, a lawyer, business executive, facilitator, interfaith minister and management consultant. Michael is a long time student of culture change, individual development, organizational dynamics and the world's wisdom traditions. For more information please visit, www.onespiritfaith.org

Feasting & Fasting at the Table of Abraham

Fellowship In Prayer once again joined the Interfaith Dialog Center of Central Jersey in hosting: An Interfaith Dialogue Luncheon on Feasting & Fasting at the Table of Abraham, moderated by Dr. Joy Ohayia. Join us in pondering how feasting and fasting are active forms of prayer and celebrations of faith.

... In Christianity

SISTER MIRIAM MCGILLIS



Christians, as well as Muslims and Jews, are at a new time in history. Our traditions are not yet finished developing. I would like to look at feasting and fasting around the particular circumstances that mark the moment in which we now live. We already share a common understanding about the sacredness of food and how it brings us into

relationship with our Divine Creator, and calls us to communion and community through relationships of equality and justice around the table of life. What is new and significant is that we are the first generation in the whole of human history to realize that Earth is moving through the terminal phase of the Cenozoic era. This biological and geological era is about 65 million years old. So the atmospheres, the soils, the waters, are all markedly different than they were when our ancestors, the early children of Abraham, inhabited the earth. Their food and water and feasting and fasting were shaped by the particular circumstances of their time in history when they lived on a planet that seemed to them to be stable, ready made, finished, prepared by the

Divine Creator, a garden into which they were introduced and told to tend.

There is something profoundly different about our moment in history. We do not have the assurance of a future of stability. Collectively, the human psyche, the soul, the imagination, the mind of our human species has been shaped by living for two and a half million years on a planet splendid in its diversity and beauty, in its challenges, and constraints, all of which were the conditions for evoking the evolution of human consciousness. This is no longer the case. The conditions of our time and our children's time are neither stable nor predictable.

The Abrahamic faiths share a common belief in a transcendent Divine Being who created the world in seven days, metaphorically or literally. Creation was understood as good, but missing something; thus the human was created. According to this story of the origin and nature of the universe, the Divine Creator breathed a spiritual soul into the human making our nature unique in the whole of creation. This soul was not breathed into the rest of creation, and thus only the human was capable of a spiritual relationship with the Divine. Since only the human has spirit, the human defines the rest of creation, gives it its meaning, value and use. This stewardship model in which humans are charged with tending and caring for creation evoked a certain kind of awareness. But it gave rights to humans and no rights to that which is not human. It established a relationship of use over nature. From these early assumptions we might trace the foundations of our present legal system which gives property rights to humans and legitimates the extractive economy which presently is responsible for terminating the conditions of the Cenozoic era.

You can see we aren't just facing a moral issue. This is a cosmological issue which has vast moral implications.

Over the last several hundred years humans have acquired a new type of awareness. We have gone into the interior depths of the atom and have discovered it is not made of matter. Similarly

we have created instruments such as the Hubble telescope and have expanded our capacity to see the vastness of time and space in the outer world. We understand the origin and nature of the universe in ways that were not empirically available to us before now. These revelations have changed everything.

The image of Earth as first seen from space in 1969, revealed a planet that could not have been imagined by our ancestors. Gradually we are realizing that it is not just a physical, material planet with life assembled and placed on it, nor are we humans walking on it. Rather, Earth is a living being in its own right. We are the generation realizing that we are Earth in human form, just as a maple tree is Earth in maple tree form and whale is Earth in whale form. There is only one Earth and it is itself alive

I believe we must
rethink feasting and fasting.

and it has a unique history in our solar system. The sun, Earth and the other planets have emerged from a supernova explosion of a first generation star.

As Einstein pondered the origin and nature of the Universe, he developed his ideas about the original primal energy exploding into being and giving birth to everything that exists. Over its 13.6 billion year history, this energy has been constantly morphing into new forms from the primal atomic elements, to galaxies, stars, supernovas, solar systems, and planets. It has emerged in Earth as life in all its complexity, human life and human self-reflective consciousness, a single, unbroken sequence that changes everything we may hold dear about any sacred table around which we gather.

The first sacred feast was the communion of energy and life—the sun giving its energy away was captured by living organisms in the early ocean through the miracle of photosynthesis. And from that time on, the transubstantiation of that sacrificial energy into life is the basis of every sacrificial meal at which we gather. It is all sacred. If we are people of faith

and we say there is a God and God created the universe, then the universe must be the primary way God reveals God. So the process of how the universe has emerged is revelatory of the Divine Being out of whom it proceeds.

When we look through the lens of quantum physics and gaze into the mysterious depths of atomic elements, or into the structure of energy, all of those things—it is as if we are taking a crash course in Divine Revelation through the primary text of the universe itself. If 13 billion years after it began, the universe as Earth is in this room having this conversation in us, then the intelligence, the memory, the capacity, the imagination, the creative energy that are in each of us, had to have been a potential capacity of the universe from the very beginning. This non-material dimension permeates everything. There is a level of spirit in every species and there is no atom that does not have at its depth a non-material identity. That's brand new news.

As a Christian, I believe we must rethink feasting and fasting. Especially since much of what is on our tables is drenched with chemical toxins that didn't exist before humanity began to grow food with industrial chemicals and technologies. Over the last hundred years food and water have become lethal to consume. Our ancestors never had to deal with this issue. Surely this is a sacrilege, a desecration of the original gift, the original Eucharist, the original bread, the original wine.

This is a new moment for a human generation just becoming aware of deep time—not just the time of our religious traditions, or of our human species, our planet, or even the total universe. But of a realization of the profound unity of all existence which from the very beginning has had the potential to emerge into a diversifying, conscious self. This planet is where that diversity, that unity, that evolving community's existence brings forth this miracle we call life, which is the foundation of our invitation to participate in creating the future. I think there is work waiting to be done when it comes to feasting. Perhaps it begins with restoring the integrity of food as a gift of sun and rain and soils and microbes and animals

and all members of the community of life who precede our appearance in time and on whom we are utterly dependent. This is a celebration we have missed for thousands of years. We enter into communion with food, and with it the vast depth and breadth of the universe and the Creator whose revelation it is.

When I think of the fasting called for in this day, I think of the need to fast from those influences in our industrial, economic-growth society by which we contaminate food. We might also consider fasting from foods forced by the use of fossil fuels to overwhelm the soil by forcing yields that the land itself is not capable of producing. We might fast from the use of those petroleum-based chemicals that poison the plants and insects we call weeds and pests. A small, diversified approach to growing food on parcels of land without chemicals is far more sustainable in the long run but this implies that many more of us will need to be involved in growing the food we eat. That's a big shift for a civilization where less than one percent of its people grow food for the rest.


Most of all we need to fast from thinking we're going to be redeemed from our blindness and its consequences when we feed this stuff to our children. Especially in this time, we need to fast from foods that have been genetically-engineered. We have to fast from purchasing from sources that create these transgenic foods. They are doing what God would never have done and which has never happened naturally in the 5 billion years of the planet. Nature does not take the genetic endowment of one species and force it to cross with another species. We must fast from such an arrogance, which insists it can achieve a good outcome for a few beneficiaries at the cost of risking the entire natural fabric of life. There's something inherently violent about this. I believe we must fast from participating in these systems, not because they're full of bad people trying to do bad things—in fact, they're probably full of very good people who are simply operating out of a vision which has nothing to do with the way the world really is.

So, at this very significant moment, may all the deep wisdom of our traditions not only be cherished but re-interpreted, opened up, expanded beyond our historic understandings. May this new generation of faithful Jews, Christians and Muslims gather around the table of Abraham and respond with courage to God's command: "I have placed before you life and death; choose life that you and your children may live."

We frequently speak about generosity and hospitality as being part of the nature of our humanness. It is also the nature of the forests, of the soils, of microbes. It's the nature of birds and flocks of geese, and schools of fish. It is the nature of seeds. They are all hospitable; they are all about community. This hospitality is the Torah, the Koran, the Bible. It was written into every cell of life long before humans ever emerged.

The exclusion of any form of life through the economic disparities that we have come to tolerate as normal, or the reducing of life to simply economic criteria--this is what must be prophetically critiqued. We are a very, very young species just waking up to the depth of our true identity and purpose in this sacred universe as this sacred planet.

I would like to end my reflection with a few lines from one of my favorite Persian poets, Hafiz of Shiraz,

"Even after all this time the sun never says to earth, 'You owe me.' Look what happens with a love like that. It lights the whole sky." 

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. . . In Islam

IMAM SOHAIB SULTAN



There is a passage in the Koran in which God says, "Oh new soul, who has achieved a state of tranquility and peace, return to your core well pleased and well pleasing. Return to your Lord in a state of contentment. Go in and among my servants and into my garden." This passage speaks about a soul who is in a state of peace and tranquility with its Lord and its Lord's creation. Perhaps, this is why the famous Persian poet and philosopher, Rumi, suggests the Koran is a book that unfolds the path to happiness. As we all know, brothers and sisters, happiness is something that can be quite relative and subjective. Different people find happiness in different things.

There was a great Muslim theologian by the name of Mohammed al-Ghazzali who died in 1111. He wrote a very famous book, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, in which he looks at the various aspects of the self that are in competition when it comes to happiness. He says there is the self that is like a cow and finds happiness in sleeping, eating, drinking, copulating, and all of the other things that fulfill basic desires. Then there is the aggressive tiger self that finds happiness in possessions, even if it means exploiting other people or stealing from them. There is a self that finds its happiness in completely disregarding God's teachings and commandments, believing the greater the rebellion against God, the more happiness will be found in life. He says there is still yet another type of self that finds its happiness in remembrance, celebration and praise of God. If this self is elevated above the rest, then we attain to a state of happiness that is everlasting, able to penetrate any walls and overcome any barriers. This is transcendent happiness. In Islam, when we talk about the soul achieving

happiness, we are really talking about a state of peace and tranquility, a pleasure and delight that goes beyond base desires and continues beyond the lifetime of the individual. This is how the Koran unfolds the path to happiness.

Feasting and fasting are part of this path in Islam and associated with the holy month of *Ramadan*. Muslims are asked to fast—to abstain from eating and drinking from sunrise to sunset every single day for twenty-nine or thirty days. The reason Ramadan is chosen as the month to engage in this strict discipline is because it is the month during which the Koran was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed.

If we understand the Koran to be the path of unfolding happiness, we see there is a direct correlation between fasting and the soul attaining a state of peace and tranquility with its Lord. The month of Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. And with what do we associate the

Fasting is not only about eating and drinking . . .

ninth month? Birth. After conception, there is the process of development, and after much anticipation and with much hope, the ninth month arrives and with it the birth of a child, a new soul in the world. The purpose of Ramadan is not for Muslims to be devout for one month, but rather to express the devotion that is part of the entire nine months before Ramadan and results in a new birth of the soul.

Fasting is an attempt to control one of the strongest of human desires—the passion in our stomachs. Our desire to eat and drink is part of our human nature. When a child is born the first thing the child does is take milk. When we fast, we practice discipline, we learn to control our desires and therefore, to control our egos. Once we know we can exercise control over one of the strongest of human passions, then we know there are other passions we can also control, related to every part of our bodies. Fasting is not only about abstaining

from eating and drinking, it is abstaining from using our hands in a way that would displease God or destroy God's creation. It is abstaining from using our feet to go places where God is rejected and mocked or places that lead to the corruption of the world. It is fasting from using our tongues to speak about things that cause hurt or harm to other human beings, making us more distant from our Lord. It is a fasting from the use of our private parts, staying away from activities that God has not enjoined in blessed marriage. Ramadan fasting is fasting practiced by the entire body: ears, eyes, tongue, hands, feet, privates and of course, the stomach—all in order to attain to an unending state of happiness and tranquility within the heart and soul. Within Islamic spiritual teachings there is the idea that the more we clear other paths within our bodies, the more we will be able to bear witness to the reality of God. This is why it is so important to understand fasting as a holistic type of fasting, and not just as abstaining from eating and drinking.

Furthermore, fasting is not only the act of an individual. Muslims are called upon to fast together during the month of Ramadan. When we have not only individuals, but a community fasting, and when, across faiths, we can take seriously the idea of fasting, then perhaps we will be able to attain peace and tranquility in the world. When we take fasting from the individual level to the social level, fasting becomes a fasting from hatred and jealousy, a fasting from anger and arrogance and violence, from all those things that not only take us away from God but take us away from a peaceful world. The goal therefore of fasting is to create not only a state of tranquility within the soul, but a state of tranquility in the world. This means there must be a rejection of war, of violence and exploitation—of corruption toward the earth.

Ramadan is not only about fasting; there is also feasting involved. When the sun goes down on these days of fasting, we come together and feast. And when Ramadan falls in the month of August, as it did this year and the days are very

long—boy, do we feast! Traditionally, the best food is cooked during Ramadan. In the Muslim community we embrace the ideal of fasting to recognize the blessings of food and water and to grow in gratitude together, as a community. There is a saying that when you lose something, you come to really understand its value. When food and clean water are so readily accessible to us, we can take them for granted. Fasting from them can help us grow more grateful. Then, when we feast, we truly celebrate the food and clean water God gives us.

There are additional important questions around feasting. Who is invited to our feast? With whom are we willing to feast? If God were to join us for one of our feasts would God be happy? Would we even recognize God in our midst?

It's very easy for us to feast with people who think like us and look like us, are of similar wealth and status, but feasting with people who think differently or look different, or aren't on the same level as we are in society is far more challenging. The Prophet Mohammed said the best feasts are the gatherings to which the poor are invited and the worst are those from which the poor are barred.

There was once a time when the Prophet Mohammed was sitting with a group of companions feasting and a man came in who was quite ill. Wherever he would sit, the person next to him would get up and move. They were uncomfortable in his presence. The Prophet Mohammed observed this behavior for a while, and then he got up, smiled at the man, took his hand and invited the sick man to sit next to him. He rested his hand on the man's knee and ate with him. The Prophet invited him to the feast.

All our great teachers from our various faith traditions are people of great wisdom, towering souls, who brought into their midst people who were completely disenfranchised in society. Our responsibility, our task is to follow them and try to find our way to a more inclusive table. We need to make Abraham's Table very long and wide, including even those

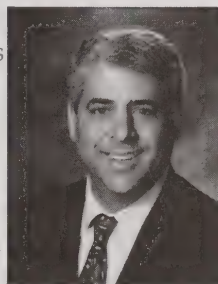
beyond the Abrahamic faiths. There's a beautiful verse in the Koran, Chapter 58:11, in which God says, "Oh You who have attained to a state of faith, when you are told to make room for another person in your collective life, do make room, and in return, God will make room for you." So when it comes to fasting and feasting, it is not only the state of our souls that is important, we as individuals and as communities of faith have the obligation and the opportunity to bring people together to create a world of peace and happiness. **SJ**

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. . . In Judaism

RABBI ADAM FELDMAN

If we think about the Biblical stories associated with Abraham's Table, three things stand out. There was wonderful food; there was dialog; and I'm sure there was prayer. It is wonderful any time we come together for food, dialog and prayer.



I'm not sure there is anything a Rabbi can speak more easily about than food because we Jews love food. However, believe it or not, there are no uniquely Jewish foods. A lot of people associate German foods with Jewish foods. The truth is that most foods identified as Jewish really come from the culture of wherever the Jewish community lived at a particular time—there are Polish, Moroccan, Turkish, American influences in what we think are Jewish foods. In Israel today, many people talk about Israeli food but it is also food that originated somewhere else and was brought to Israel.

While the whole notion of distinctively Jewish food is cultural, Jews do make eating a religious experience, and by this I mean that we bring God to the table. We begin every meal with a blessing. Anytime we eat, even if it's not a meal, we begin with words of blessing. The blessing depends on what we are eating . . . if it's a snack it's one blessing, if it's fruit there's another, and if it's a meal, there's still another. We bless the One who brings forth bread on the earth, who creates the fruit on the vine. After a meal is prepared, we sit at the table and pause to reflect, to acknowledge God's presence and to express our gratitude to God for bringing food to our world.

Now there are two particular items at the Jewish table that I would like to highlight: wine and bread. Wine is sacred in

Judaism. It is used in all religious meals and ceremonies. There is a special blessing that we say before we drink wine, known as *Kiddush* and it means sanctification. The blessing is done on Friday nights at the beginning of the Sabbath meal or to consecrate the day at the start of a festival. Wine is also part of a Jewish wedding ceremony. I was fortunate to officiate at a wedding a few days ago and I said the blessing over the wine but the bride and groom were the ones who drank it! Wine is also included in the circumcision ceremony performed eight days after a baby boy is born. The *bris* signifies the covenant between the baby boy and God. A meal with wine follows both the wedding and the *bris*, and is considered a significant part of these religious ceremonies.

There is also a special blessing said over bread and if we are having bread, it means we are having a meal. There is a longer, more formal blessing then said after the meal. It is called *Birkat HaMazon* and is a blessing for sustenance—*mazon* is sustenance. The blessing before the meal is quick because we're hungry—but after the meal, we take time to acknowledge God as the source of our sustenance and we praise God for all the meals in our lives. On *Shabbat* and other festive occasions, we eat a special twisted bread called *Challah*. On Passover, Jews have the custom of eating unleavened bread, *Matzo*. This reminds us of the biblical story about the Israelites having to take leave of Egypt so quickly that their bread did not have time to rise. We symbolically do what they did in our celebration of Passover.

Another important Jewish holiday is *Sukkot*, the Feast of Booths, which takes place in the Fall and is a Jewish celebration of the harvest and an expression of gratitude to God. This feast is also a remembrance of the time the Jews spent wandering in the desert after their deliverance from Egypt, living and worshipping in tents. Therefore, it is customary for us to build a temporary structure, a *sukkah* with thatched roof, open to the sky. Some Jews choose to live in the *sukkah* for the

week while others simply eat their meals there. One of the great things about Sukkot is that it is also a time for inviting guests to our table. This includes symbolically inviting Biblical guests. Traditionally, only Biblical men were invited but in modern times, we now invite women as well—and couples like Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca. In my house, we have a poster we decorate and on which we list our guests. We also invite our family and friends to Sukkot.

The dietary laws of Judaism are complicated but basically, they tell us how to keep kosher. This means there are certain animals, birds and fish that we eat and others that we do not eat. We also do not mix meat and dairy products together. We actually use separate dishes for meat and dairy to help us avoid cooking or eating them together. We have two sets of everything and we wait a certain amount of time between eating one and then eating the other. If we eat dairy first, we wait at least one hour until eating meat. If we eat meat first, we wait three hours until eating dairy. There are, of course, many foods that are neither milk nor meat. We call them *Parve*, fruits and vegetables. They are foods that can be eaten together. There have been lots of attempts over the years to explain why we do these things. Some say it is for health reasons but the explanation that makes the most sense to me is that it's what God commanded us to do in the Bible.

Now, while we follow the Bible's dietary laws, we understand they are the foundation for an evolution of Jewish laws. The new questions being raised today may lead to new laws. For instance, there are concerns now about the preservatives and chemicals in our foods and healthy eating is an important Jewish value. In Judaism, we are instructed to take care of our bodies through proper exercise, rest and healthy eating. There are also questions today about the ethical treatment of workers and these questions have led to the modern concept of *magen tzedek* that is now sweeping the Jewish world. Magen tzedek points out that we do not only



need to care about how animals are treated, but we also need to care about how workers are treated. This applies not only to food workers but to those who work for other companies, as well. We all know there are many workers in our world today who are not treated properly, whether it's working conditions or economics or anything else. Whenever we buy a product from a particular company we are endorsing that company's

behavior, so we have an ethical obligation to know what their policies and practices are in relationship to their workers.


Jews don't only feast, we also fast. There are seven different religious fast days in the Jewish calendar. *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, is the one that is best known. It falls on the tenth day of the Jewish New Year and is a twenty-five hour fast day. All Jewish holidays are actually twenty-five hours long because we add a little bit of time at the beginning and a little bit at the end to make sure we don't violate the prescribed twenty-four hour course from the beginning of sundown the night before until the end of sundown the following day. Yom Kippur is a day when we focus on the mistakes we've made in our lives. In Judaism we believe that everyone makes mistakes and we need to acknowledge them and make atonement. We understand that we cannot atone to God for our mistakes unless we first talk to the people we may have hurt and apologize to them. Yom Kippur is a day when we refrain from eating, drinking, sexual relations and other activities to focus on the importance of reconciliation with each other and with God. It is a very challenging task, so we do this in communion with one another, depending on one another, leaning on one another. We spend a lot of the day at the synagogue.

Another twenty-five hour fast day in Judaism is on the ninth day of the month *Av*, which occurs in late summer. It is the day we recall the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people, especially the destruction of the holy temple in Jerusalem. In Jewish tradition there were two temples destroyed on the same day, though 500 years apart. On *Tisha B'Av*, we refrain from eating and drinking as a sign that we are in mourning.

In Judaism, there are five minor fast days lasting from sunrise to sunset. One of these occurs the day before Passover. Anyone who is a first-born fasts on this day to remind themselves the first-born children of the Jews exiled in Egypt were killed. Another example of a minor fast is the day before

Purim, when we fast like Esther did before she went to speak to the king. The other three formal fast days are all related to the destruction of the Temple. Additionally, there are fast days that are more specific, associated with a particular life event, like a wedding. It is traditional for a bride and groom to fast the day of their wedding prior to the ceremony. It is like their own personal Yom Kippur, a day of reflection on their life before they transition from one stage to another

Jewish fasts are an acknowledgment of our errors, an expression of our supplication to God and a means of remembrance. Before organized structured prayer was started in our tradition, the community would call for communal fasting as prayer. For instance in the arid desert when the people needed rain, they would fast for rain.

I can't help but think how pleased Abraham would be if he were here to see us gathered around the table, talking and listening to one another. Abraham cared about people, about breaking bread together, dialoging and learning from one another. He taught us the meaning of hospitality. In Judaism, when we begin our Passover Seder, we say, "Let all who are hungry come and eat." For me to say these words sitting around my dining room table where everyone has a place is one thing. It's quite another to say them knowing I am literally inviting "the hungry" to come in, just as Abraham did. Tradition tells us that Abraham's tent was in the middle of the desert and at a crossroads so he and Sarah had many visitors. The unique thing about Abraham's tent was that it had four doors, one on each side so from whatever direction someone approached, there was an opening. No one had to walk around, wondering how to gain entrance. Abraham was always ready to welcome everyone. We are called to do the same. 

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Noah's Pudding Celebration

It was thousands of years ago when the Prophet Noah called his community to repent and return to belief in the one, true God or suffer the consequences of God's anger in a massive flood. Those who were faithful joined Noah and many of the earth's creatures on an ark for a long and tumultuous journey. Days passed, food became scarce and they were all facing starvation. Noah gathered all the ingredients that were left and mixed them together to produce a delicious sweet pudding, now known as "Noah's Pudding." The next day the flood waters receded. The believers celebrated the joy of Noah's landing and God's great goodness.

Today, this dessert-like dish is prepared by Muslims and Christians, especially in the Middle East, during the observance of *Ashura*, the tenth day of the holy month of *Muharram*, the first month of the Islamic calendar and derived from the Jewish Day of Atonement. Since this date is based on the lunar calendar, it is a moveable celebration and may vary from country to country. This year's celebration is on December 5th.

People cook Noah's Pudding in remembrance of Noah and of God's mercy. They send a cup to each of their neighbors as a symbol of hospitality and the desire to maintain good relations, regardless of their differences in religious beliefs and practices. We invite you to join in honoring this tradition by sharing this story and a cup of Noah's Pudding with your friends and neighbors. 



Noah's Pudding Receipe

- 1 cup barley
- 1 cup white kidney beans (in a can), washed and drained
- 1 cup chickpeas (in a can), washed and drained
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 10 cups water
- 10 dry apricots, soaked in water overnight, cut in pieces
- 10 dry figs, cut in pieces
- 1/2 cup raisins

Bring 4 cups of water along with the barley to a boil. Turn it down to medium-low heat and cook for about half an hour. Add the kidney beans, chickpeas, vanilla, apricots, raisins, figs, sugar and 6 cups of hot water. Cook for another 45 minutes on medium-low heat. Stir occasionally. Pour into a large serving bowl and let cool. Keep Noah's Pudding refrigerated. When serving, garnish with crumbled walnuts.

Good Food for the Greater Good

LIBBY BIRKY

Lunch hour is kind of crazy at the SAME Café, the 40-seat restaurant my husband, Brad, and I run here in Denver.

Between cooking, serving, chatting with the regulars and overseeing our small staff of volunteers, I hardly have a chance to grab a bite myself. But one day a woman in her 50s dressed in a business outfit strode in. "Hi, Libby," she called.

I stopped and did a double-take. Wow, I thought, she's come a long way. The first time she came to the café, almost two years ago, she didn't have the money to pay for her meal. No problem. Like many of our customers, she volunteered to work and after a bowl of Brad's white-bean spinach soup and a slice of apple pecan and bleu cheese pizza, she washed dishes and swept. Look at her now, I thought. I stole a glance at Brad, cooking in the open kitchen. Wasn't this just what we'd hoped for?

In 2003, on a flight home from Texas, we'd hatched this crazy dream. I was a teacher and Brad worked in I.T. We'd both done a lot of volunteering at soup kitchens. It was something we felt called to do, feeding the poor. If only it weren't so dispiriting at times. "Remember the creamed peas we had to make?" I asked Brad. Big industrial cans of peas that we mixed with flour—the end result looked like wallpaper paste. Probably tasted like it too. The guests didn't seem any more inspired than we were. They sat at long tables eating off of trays, nobody saying a word.

"I wish we could start our own place," I said. "I want a place that honors the dignity of each person who walks through the door—some place that people would want to eat at with really good, healthy food."

"Why don't we?" Brad said. "Something more like a

restaurant where people wouldn't mind hanging out and talking."

All at once we were jotting down ideas, me on a cocktail napkin, Brad in the margin of a magazine.

"We'll have a real menu," I said.

"Healthy food, fresh organic vegetables," Brad added. He was the cook in our house, and a good one too.

"No cash register," I said. "Just a donation box on the counter."

It would be a charity but we didn't want our diners to think of it as a charity. "If a customer can't pay," Brad said, "he can help wash dishes or mop the floor. Not a place for another hand-out."

Brad signed up for culinary classes at night and I began looking for possible venues. Right away we hit hurdles. "There's no such thing as a free lunch," one potential landlord sniffed. "You seem like nice kids, but you're crazy to think this will ever work." I met with brokers, contractors and suppliers, only to watch them walk away, shaking their heads. Was our idea that unrealistic?

No bank would lend us the money to open a restaurant with no cash register. The only way we could get funds was to cash in \$30,000 from our IRA—our future, almost everything we had.

"Maybe we really are crazy," I said to Brad one night. "Maybe we should just forget about this."

"Libby, this is something we believe in. We've gotta do it."

Finally a landlord agreed to lease us some space on Colfax Street. We handed out flyers around the neighborhood, asked friends to spread the word, and held our breath.

An early customer was a woman in her 40s. She told me that she was recently divorced and she and her two young children had no place of their own.

"Could I have a salad?" she asked.

I brought her a plate of greens with fresh fruit and nuts. Her eyes grew wide. "These are the first fresh vegetables I've had in

four months," she exclaimed. That alone made our struggles to open the café worth it.

A few ate without paying or donating an hour of work. But most gave what they could, even if it was just a dollar. At first Brad and I kept our day jobs. It was the only way to make ends meet. Then a funny thing happened. More people from all walks of life started coming. Lawyers, doctors, architects, other professionals. They came for Brad's cooking. No surprise there. But they also liked what our café stood for. SAME is an acronym. It's short for our credo: So All May Eat.

Word traveled fast, thanks to stories in the local papers and on TV. Soon we had more than 50 customers a day. "What do I owe you?" one patron asked. "Whatever you think the meal is worth," I answered, "whatever you can afford."

Those with money gave, and then some. One of our customers left a check for \$500. Another bought \$1,000 in gift certificates. Still another donated a truck so we could haul produce from organic suppliers around the county. Eventually, we were able to quit our day jobs and work full-time at the restaurant.

Our dream is still coming true. We serve good, healthy food to people in need. What we have found is that most people who are struggling in this economy need to be seen—not be invisible. They need access to good healthy food. They want to make their lives better but because of this economy are struggling. Some have lost their homes, jobs, and their sense of self worth. What they need to get back on their feet is someone to care. We treat everyone with dignity. We hoped all along to develop a real sense of community—the comfortable and the poor, so that we might help one another. That woman in the business attire was one of them.

Something was different about her that day. Something besides her outfit. She stopped at the counter and ordered greens with sun-dried tomatoes and goat cheese, and a ham-and-pineapple pizza.

"I have something to tell you," she said. "The last time I was here, I sat down and started talking to a woman I'd met here before. She said, 'There's an opening in my office. Why don't you come over and apply?' I did and I got the job."

I knew what was different about her—confidence. Hope. "I'm so happy for you," I said.

She opened her purse. "I can pay now," she said. "How can I ever thank you?"

"You just did," I said. 



Since Libby and Brad Birky opened SAME Café in October of 2006, over 50,000 meals have been served at this location and there are now thirteen cafés nationwide following in the footsteps of serving up good food with a side of dignity. For their work in food justice the Birkys have been highlighted on *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams* in his segment, "Making a Difference." Inspired by the Birkys example, the co-founder of *Panera Bread Company* convinced his corporate offices to open several pay-what-you-can missions.

Our World, Our Choice

JUDITH K. ROBINSON

What could unite us in nurturing a reverence for life and constant wonder at the recycling of life's energy? The greatest gift to us from the earth—our food. It is grown from soil that has taken millions of years to form. Do we treat this soil with respect? Gently opening it to receive our seeds, nurturing it with its own natural substances, moistening it with clean water, letting it rest itself so that it can gather its strength and again give back to us. If instead we attack it with sharp blades, ripping apart the intricate structure of its ability to be in balance—douse it with caustic chemicals—apply intense synthetic formulas, ultimately starve the soil of life-sustaining nutrients and organic matter so it lacks the ability to absorb and store water, erosion and flooding become common occurrences.

We cannot control the surges of the elements but we can try to understand them as much as possible and as in managing our passions—to work with them. We are part of the beauty and power of this life cycle. Spiritually, politically, and economically we can unite our energies to choose to produce food in a way that sustains our earth and our people in a positive and joyous way. We can cultivate a healthy cooperative relationship with the earth so that it will be able to cradle our children and theirs in the years to come.

It is our world, our choice. 

Judith K. Robinson is an environmentalist, organic grower, farm market manager, a writer, director and workshop teacher. Her work expresses her passion to awaken the awareness that the health of the environment and care of the soil determines the health of our food supply. Judith teaches classes in "Developing Healthy Eating Habits," and other related subjects.

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